

Healing by Fiction: Carlos Castaneda in the Context of Neo-Shamanism and Psychotherapy

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Abstract: Carlos Castaneda is famous for the series of books about his shamanistic apprenticeship and, subsequently, mastery. As an author, however, he seems to be resisting any categorization as he has been moving on the borders of ethnography, fiction and esoterism. This article aims to assess his possible contribution to psychotherapeutic theory and practice. Castaneda is considered one of the fathers of the neo-shamanistic movement that seems to be linked to some schools of Western psychotherapy in many ways. However, he does not display many of its typical characteristics. While neo-shamanism tends to emphasize positive aspects of the world, harmony and healing, Castaneda emphasizes contemplating the “dark side of the world” and his approach contains a lot of dangerous and potentially psychologically disruptive techniques. Castaneda is thus probably less convenient for psychotherapeutic use than some of his followers. Despite that, some elements of his work seem to have a psychotherapeutic potential and they have not been left unnoticed in the psychotherapeutic community. I emphasize two specific elements of his work to be key in this respect: narrativity and direct bodily experience. Castaneda’s ambiguous position at the borders of genres thus can serve us to perceive their permeability at the one hand but also to remind us of the importance of keeping them apart on the other hand.

Keywords: Carlos Castaneda; Neo-Shamanism; Psychotherapy; Body; Narrative

Abstrakt: Carlos Castaneda je známý sérií knih o svém šamanistickém učednictví a později mistrovství. Jakožto autora však není snadné jej kategorizovat: pohyboval se na hranicích etnografie, fikce a esoterismu. Tento článek má za cíl zhodnotit jeho potenciální přínos k psychoterapeutické teorii a praxi. Castaneda je považován za jednoho z otců neošamanistického hnutí, u něhož bývá poukazováno na mnohé styčné body s některými proudy západní psychoterapie. U samotného Castanedy mnohé z jeho typických charakteristik nenajdeme. Zatímco neošamanismus má tendenci zdůrazňovat pozitivní aspekty světa, harmonii a léčení, Castaneda zdůrazňuje vnímání „temné strany světa“ a jeho přístup obsahuje mnoho potenciálně nebezpečných a psychologicky narušujících technik. Castaneda je tedy z hlediska využitelnosti pro psychoterapii méně vhodný než mnozí jeho následovníci. Přesto se zdá, že některé prvky jeho práce mají psychoterapeutický potenciál a v psychoterapeutické komunitě nezůstaly zcela bez povšimnutí. Ve článku zdůrazňuji zejména dva prvky jeho práce jako obzvláště důležité v tomto ohledu: narativitu a důraz na tělesnou zkušenost. Castanedova těžko uchopitelná pozice na pomezí žánrů nám tak může na jedné straně posloužit k nahlédnutí jejich propustnosti, ale na druhé straně nám může též pomoci k nahlédnutí důležitosti jejich oddělenosti.

Klíčová slova: Carlos Castaneda; neošamanismus; psychoterapie; tělesnost; narativ

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Carlos Castaneda in the context of traditional Shamanism and Neo-Shamanism

Carlos Castaneda was an American author who wrote a series of 12 books describing his shamanic apprenticeship under the tutelage of an alleged Yaqui *brujo*, or more specifically ‘man of knowledge’, called Don Juan. The character of the first ethnographically aimed books differs wildly from his late work which presents a systematized magico-religious teaching. To put it very simply, the system describes techniques that can be used by a specially trained “warrior” in order for them to retain their consciousness after death. Castaneda was moving at the edge of several fields and genres and his work has long oscillated between the categories of fiction and fact in bookstores. Having gained his doctorate in anthropology for the third of his books,¹ he presented himself as a scientist who reveals an authentic indigenous form of shamanism or sorcery.² He stood in opposition to the movements of hippies, counter-culture, and the New Age³ as he understood it and to promoters of psychedelic substances such as Timothy Leary.⁴ However, the ethnographic authenticity of his work has been questioned by a number of anthropologists and other authors and it is generally considered a hoax within the academic world.⁵

¹ CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1972, *passim*.

² CHRISTOPHE BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda, pravda lži, životopis*, Praha: Volvox Globator 2006, *passim* (originally published as CHRISTOPHE BOURSEILLER, *La vérité du mensonge*, Paris: Editions du Rocher 2005, 264 p.). See also CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna* [Readers of Infinity], Praha: Dobra 2004, *passim*. The Czech book is a compilation of various Castaneda's texts mainly published in 1996 in *A Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. An archive of the original articles is available online at https://archive.org/stream/carloscastaneda/Carlos%20Castaneda%20books/Carlos%20Castaneda%20-%20A%20Journal%20Of%20Applied_djvu.txt.

³ The term New Age is difficult to define. On the one hand, some definitions see it as a relatively unified movement, or rather a broader zeitgeist, with specific characteristics. See e.g. PAUL HEELAS, *The New Age Movement: Religion, Culture and Society in the Age of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 1996, *passim*. On the other hand, there are voices that see it as a label that conflates mutually unrelated beliefs, see GEORGE D. CHRYSIDES, “Defining the New Age”, in DAREN KEMP and JAMES R. LEWIS (eds.), *Handbook of New Age*, Boston: Brill 2007, pp. 5–24; STEVEN SUTCLIFFE, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices*, London and New York: Routledge 2002, 195. Bearing in mind that from the point of view of ethnography, the term can be too generalizing and indeed essentializing, I still use it in a broad manner as an umbrella term. If its eclectic character is one of the defining traits of the supposed movement, Castaneda clearly departs from it in that he (in the words of Don Juan) refuses to compare and combine the Don Juan's teachings with any other spiritual tradition, as exemplified in the dialog of the two men about parallels with Tibetan Buddhism. See CARLOS CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1971, p. 234–235.

⁴ Whom he even called “the king of trolls”; see BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda*, p. 84. On the other hand, Castaneda was praised within the American counter-culture and, at least to some degree, by Leary himself, see TIMOTHY LEARY, *Flashbacks: A Personal and Cultural History of an Era: An Autobiography*, New York: Tarcher 1990, p. 164, 337, 392.

⁵ RICHARD DE MILLE, *Castaneda's Journey*, Santa Barbara: Capra Press 1976, *passim*; WESTON LA BARRE, “Stinging Criticism from the Author of The Peyote Cult”, in: DANIEL C. NOEL (ed.), *Seeing Castaneda: Reactions to the “Don Juan” Writings of Carlos Castaneda*, New York: Putnam 1976, p. 40–42; JANE H. KELLEY, *Yaqui Women: Contemporary Life Histories*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1978, p. 24–25. For summary see BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda, passim*; DANIEL

Although Castaneda has *de facto* deceived his readers, the postmodern cultural milieu made it possible for his work to be appraised despite or even for its very origin in fiction.⁶ Castaneda himself often talks about the world being constructed by the way we talk about it and claims the consensual reality we take for granted is mere fiction. And conversely, fiction is reality for him. This means that Castaneda embodies the content of his theory by its form – for him, the very fact of “deception” represents a creative act of constructing a new reality.⁷ Similarly to what his teacher Don Juan taught him, Castaneda teaches his readers that they should not stick too strictly to the rigid notion of reality. According to this view, the question of whether Don Juan was or was not a ‘real man’ is missing the point in the same way that ‘Carlos’ – Carlos is the young Castaneda of his early work – questions about whether he really flew after having used a psychoactive drug or whether it was happening just in his mind.⁸

Whether we agree with this kind of a philosophy or not, we have to admit that Carlos Castaneda was a very influential cultural figure and he has been praised by many for bringing Shamanism back to the Western world, and thus becoming one of the fathers of what is now referred to as Neo-Shamanism.⁹ Trying to go beyond the mere appropriation of exotic traditions, Daniel Noel interprets Castaneda from a Jungian perspective as one of the sources of an authentic Euro-American Shamanism for his rehabilitation of imagination and fantasy as opposed to the notion of ‘objective reality’ that has been prevalent in the last centuries.¹⁰

Having said that Castaneda was a father of Neo-Shamanism, we also have to note that he was not a typical representative of this movement either. In order to support this statement, let us name some of the basic differences between traditional Shamanism and Neo-Shamanism. First, “traditional Shamanism” is usually practiced as a service for the community while Neo-Shamanism tends to be practiced as an individual spiritual journey or individual healing.¹¹ Traditional Shamanism involves a large scale of activities bound to very specific practical, mythical-ritual, and healing needs of the community. Apart from healing as such, it can involve rituals that aim to

C. NOEL, *Seeing Castaneda, passim*; STEPHEN O. MURRAY, “The Scientific Reception of Castaneda”, *Contemporary Sociology* 8 (2, 1979): p. 189–192.

⁶ CHARLOTTE E. HARDMAN, “‘He May Be Lying But What He Says Is True’: The Sacred Tradition of Don Juan as Reported by Carlos Castaneda, Anthropologist, Trickster, Guru, Allegorist”, in JAMES R. LEWIS and OLAV HAMMER (eds.), *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 38–55.

⁷ See DANIEL C. NOEL, *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities*, New York: Continuum 1997, p. 51.

⁸ With don Juan replying “Birds fly like birds and a man who has taken the devil’s weed flies as such”, see CARLOS CASTANEDA, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1998, p. 101.

⁹ MICHAEL HARNER, *Castaneda Controversy – Michael Harner’s Reply* [online], 1978, accessed January 2020, available online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170916140115/https://documents.mx/documents/castaneda-controversy-michael-harners-reply.html>.

¹⁰ NOEL, *The Soul of Shamanism, passim*.

¹¹ JUAN SCURO and ROBIN RODD, “Neo-Shamanism”, in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions*, [New York]: Springer 2014, p. 1–6.

secure an abundance of animals for hunting.¹² Given that these kinds of activities lose their meaning in the context of modern urban life, there is a considerable difference between the two versions of Shamanism.¹³

This points to another important difference: while traditional shamanistic practice serves a specific community and contains specific, otherwise unintelligible elements, Neo-Shamanism, following a more general New Age trend, strives for universality – this is most explicitly embodied in Michael Harner's 'Core Shamanism'.¹⁴ It is looking for the essence that is common to all shamanistic practices and rejects those cultural elements that are considered specific and nonessential.¹⁵ Ironically, this effort to find a universal core of various spiritual traditions is very typical for modern and postmodern Euro-American culture.

There is also a sort of democratization of initiation present in Neo-Shamanism – it can be practiced by anyone who reads about it or visits the workshops. In contrast, one is usually chosen by the spirits or the community in traditional Shamanism. We should also note that this choice is often far from voluntary and desired – before becoming a shaman, one typically undergoes some drastic and traumatic event that is followed with 'shamanic sickness', often entailing extreme and painful states during which the old person dies and the shaman is born.¹⁶ Every single shamanic act, for example the shamanic flight, is then often associated with pain and suffering.¹⁷

This brings us to another point of departure – a tendency to deny negative phenomena, evil, and fear, which is typical for Neo-Shamanism and that copies the ethos of the New Age movement more generally.¹⁸ Evil is often interpreted as an absence of knowledge, and the goal should be to understand and integrate entities that seem evil

¹² KNUD RASMUSSEN, *Grónské mýty a pověsti* [The Myths and Legends of Greenland], Praha: Argo 1998, p. 303.

¹³ We should note that the term shamanism is in itself sometimes criticized for encompassing an overly broad set of practices and beliefs that are in fact very disparate, see JANE MONNIG ATKINSON, "Shamanisms Today", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1, 1992): p. 307–330. Following on this, we should bear in mind that the mentioned delineation of the two version of shamanism is not absolute either. Whether we see both traditional Shamanism and Neo-Shamanism as a huge and disparate set of practices that cannot be captured by these two terms, or as specific manifestation of some archetypal pattern, we can find an emphasis on healing that goes beyond the needs of an individual in both versions. When stating that Neo-Shamanism is more individualistic, this can be also seen from the other side – that it is trying to transcend the traditional European individualism.

¹⁴ MICHAEL M. HARNER, *The Way of the Shaman*, San Francisco and New York: Harper One 1990, *passim*.

¹⁵ For this reason, it is sometimes criticized for representing a new form of cultural imperialism – stealing traditions from indigenous contexts and exporting back a universalized Western version of shamanism, see e.g. GEARY HOBSON, "The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism", in GEARY HOBSON (ed.), *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, Albuquerque: Red Earth Press 1978, p. 100–108.

¹⁶ The typical image described by Eliade is dismemberment of the body, see MIRCEA ELIADE, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, London: Penguin 1964, p. 50.

¹⁷ RASMUSSEN, *Grónské mýty a pověsti*, p. 303.

¹⁸ MICHAEL YORK, "The Role of Fear in Traditional and Contemporary Shamanism" [online], 2002, accessed September 2019, available online at <http://www.michaelyork.co.uk/Domus/CV/confpapers/cp-28.html>.

and are feared, instead of fighting and defeating them. Contrary to this, traditional Shamanism entails a great deal of suffering, fear, and pain. The shaman encounters entities whose evil cannot be denied, and they have to fight and defeat them. The spirits they encounter may be tricksters, dangerous for the unprepared.

Analogically, while in the context of modern Shamanism, negative emotions such as blame and shame are put aside, in the traditional version, blame, sin, and reconciliation of the spirits and gods play an important part. We can take the wrath of the Mother of the Sea, a common topic in the Greenland Inuit mythology, as an example. According to the myths, human sins get stuck in her hair in the form of excrements. She then punishes mankind by not sending enough animals. In this case, the shaman has to visit her and comb the excrements out from her hair. Last but not least, while the shaman is usually seen as a positive and harmonizing figure within Neo-Shamanism, the traditional shamans can also use their power to harm other people – the Greenlandic shamans sometimes summon an evil entity called *tupilak* in order to attack their enemy, or steal their soul.¹⁹ As such, shaman is often a feared and at the same time isolated figure.

The outlined differences suggest that Castaneda's work does not yet contain all the elements typical for Neo-Shamanism. There is certainly universalism and individualism – although a strong exclusivism was still apparent at an early stage (a tradition passed from master to disciple), Castaneda later talks about his decision to open the tradition represented by Don Juan to all mankind.²⁰ Castaneda's teaching has multiple phases – in the early work, attention is focused on witchcraft and altered states of consciousness, and later on a more systematic mythological interpretation of the world with a specific ritual-religious practice. The ultimate goal of the teaching is to "escape the Eagle", an impersonal entity subsisting on energy derived from consciousness of people who die. To escape effectively means to preserve one's individual consciousness after the physical death. The goal of Castaneda's teaching is neither individual healing, nor collective harmony, contrary to the approach of Core Shamanism that is far closer to psychotherapy in this respect.²¹

This is also related to the overall mood of Castaneda's work – unlike most of the New Age movement, it does not seek friendliness and positivity. Quite on the contrary, Castaneda explicitly speaks of the need to focus on the "frightening side of the world".²² His philosophy is not hedonistic; it is based on the ethos of a warrior who must be very hard on himself in order to have the firm discipline necessary to fight for his consciousness. He does not speak of harmony with the universe, all humans and creatures. Instead, he repeatedly mentions that the universe is a predatory place, filled with beings that drain energy from human beings.²³ Relationships with other

¹⁹ RASMUSSEN, *Grónské mýty a pověsti*, p. 304.

²⁰ CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 94.

²¹ MICHAEL J. HARNER, *The Way of the Shaman*, San Francisco and New York: Harper One 1990, *passim*; SCURO and RODD, "Neo-Shamanism", p. 1–6.

²² GATO, *Učení Nagualů* [The Teachings of the Naguals], Praha: DharmaGaia 1999, *passim*.

²³ CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 105.

people are also depicted in very dark colours, because each relationship creates, according to Castaneda, an emotional attachment that deprives one of his life energy. Life is essentially a struggle for energy that is desperately scarce. Castaneda, on his quest for knowledge, encounters enemy wizards, beings called “allies”, and in these encounters, he often fights for his life and is in danger of losing his soul.²⁴

Castaneda is situated in a liminal position – on the border of different genres and worlds. He takes pride in his intangibility and actively supports it – by refusing to speak in the public for a long time, systematically sweeping off all his tracks, obscuring his identity, spreading half-truths and stories. And he even reframes this trait as a sorcerer’s art of ‘stalking’. He is not a shaman in the true sense, nor an urban shaman; he is not an anthropologist, nor is he a writer of fiction or even a priest. Some interpretations point to the fact that his true inspiration is not traditional Shamanism at all, but European tradition of Philosophy and Social Science: the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, the Ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel, the Social Constructionism of Luckman and Berger, and European Occultism and Mysticism, namely the poetry of Saint John of the Cross.²⁵ Yet, it is by this very quality of intangibility that he fulfils a certain universal idea of a shaman, standing at the border of the human world and the “more-than-human” world including nature with its animals and all kinds of spirits; a shaman, who often obscures his art, who can be tricky and inapprehensive.²⁶

Castaneda’s place in the field of psychotherapy

Having described Castaneda’s role in the Neo-Shamanistic field, we can proceed to ask if Castaneda has something to say in the field of Psychotherapy. First of all it is necessary to say that Psychotherapy in itself is a huge field, which is difficult to define, being seen as an application of the science of Psychology, following the paradigm of evidence-based practice by some, or rather as an autonomous field with its own terminology and modes of thinking.²⁷ While Castaneda’s concepts would definitely

²⁴ For one of the somewhat horror-like meetings with an “ally” see CARLOS CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1971, p. 289–295.

²⁵ LARRY BARON, “Slipping inside the Crack between the Worlds: Carlos Castaneda, Alfred Schutz, and the Theory of Multiple Realities”, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 23 (2, 1983): p. 52–69; BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda, pravda lži, životopis*, p. 34.

²⁶ RASMUSSEN, *Grónské mýty a pověsti*, p. 302.

²⁷ GLENYS PARRY, “Evidence-Based Psychotherapy: An Overview”, in NANCY ROWLAND and STEPHEN GOSS (eds.), *Evidence Based Counselling and Psychological Therapies*, London and Philadelphia: Routledge 2001, p. 57–76; EMMY VAN DEURZEN-SMITH and DAVID SMITH, “Is Psychotherapy an Autonomous Scientific Discipline? A Preliminary Investigation” [online], *Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy* 27 (1996), available online at <https://iahp.org/inside-out/issue-27-winter-1996/is-psychotherapy-an-autonomous-scientific-discipline>. In this respect, we can add that psychotherapy operating within the postmodernist paradigm often praises individual relationship, personal stories and ideological accord of a client with the school of psychotherapy they attend more than scientific evidence, see also below.

not be compatible with all kinds of Psychotherapy, he can find his audience especially within the humanistic, existential or transpersonal schools.

Taking on a Jungian perspective, we can see Castaneda by the lens of the “wounded healer” archetype.²⁸ Having a non-standard psychological profile and dealing with altered states of consciousness, he could easily be seen as balancing on the edge of sanity and madness while writing his dissertation.²⁹ The border between him doing an anthropological research and being deluded became dangerously thin and there was even some rumour that he was in a psychiatric hospital, or even that he committed suicide.³⁰ However, similarly to shamans who survive their initial shamanic illness, Castaneda seems to have passed his profane initiation ritual of submitting his doctoral thesis successfully and he came out of it reborn and empowered. He definitely discovered some way of healing for himself. But can he do that for others as well?

Castaneda described in his books an initiation path in which the boundaries of the ego were often disturbed in a very violent way and which therefore only resembles little from the therapeutic context.³¹ Although various psychotherapeutic approaches differ greatly, the emphasis on safe environment is seen as key to the success of Psychotherapy.³² Of course, there are controversies and while some psychotherapeutic approaches are based on confronting the client with their traumas and fears and challenging their defence mechanisms,³³ humanistic and existential approaches tend to be less directive and more respectful of the client’s development and defence.³⁴

Although the techniques and experiences that Castaneda describes are often threatening and disintegrating, and his personality is portrayed in quite dark colours by many people who lived in close contact with him,³⁵ his work has not gone unno-

²⁸ LAWRENCE J. KIRMAYER, “Asklepian Dreams: The Ethos of the Wounded-Healer in the Clinical Encounter”, *Transcultural Psychiatry* 40 (2003): p. 248–277.

²⁹ MATYÁŠ MÜLLER, “Carlos Castaneda jako zrcadlo psychiatrie” [Carlos Castaneda as a Mirror of Psychiatry], *Dingir: Religionistický časopis o současné náboženské scéně* 14 (2, 2011): p. 38–40.

³⁰ BOURSEILLER, *Carlos Castaneda, pravda lži, životopis*, p. 97; Castaneda, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 73.

³¹ Describing these practices is beyond the scope of this article. Especially the early books describe how Don Juan strived to shatter Castaneda’s mind trained in scientific skepticism with the help of psychedelic plants, manipulating, often suddenly and without warning, his perception and consciousness so that he could see like a sorcerer.

³² ALAN RAPPOPORT, “The Patient’s Search for Safety: The Organizing Principle in Psychotherapy”, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 34 (3, 1996): p. 250–261. A safe relationship with the therapist is also one of the so called “common factors” in psychotherapy; for an integrative review see MICHAEL J. LAMBERT and DEAN E. BARLEY, “Research Summary on the Therapeutic Relationship and Psychotherapy Outcome”, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 38 (4, 2001): p. 357–361.

³³ DAVID J. NUTT and MICHAEL SHARPE, “Uncritical Positive Regard?: Issues in the Efficacy and Safety of Psychotherapy”, *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 22(1, 2008): p. 3–6.

³⁴ We can often see this even within specific approaches. For example, while Wilhelm Reich and many of his followers who practiced his vegetotherapy would disrupt the defenses of their clients in a radical way, David Boadella, who was also Reich’s student and elaborated on his method, creating a new system called biosynthesis, was considerably more cautious in this respect and realized that careless and overly rapid disruption of the defenses may lead to the development of a psychotic state. See DAVID BOADELLA, *Lifestreams*, London: Routledge 1987, *passim*.

³⁵ See for example an account of his ex-lover and apprentice: AMY WALLACE, *Sorcerer’s Apprentice: My Life with Carlos Castaneda*, Berkeley: Frog Books 2007, *passim*.

ticed in the field of Psychotherapy. It inspired especially some authors within the Gestalt therapy community. Jorge Rosner, an influential American Gestalt therapist, worked with the concept of the assemblage point and its movement, which, in Castaneda's system, corresponds to the ability to perceive various aspects of the world.³⁶ Castaneda's legacy also served as an inspiration for his friend, psychiatrist and Gestalt psychotherapist Claudio Naranjo.³⁷ Joseph Zinker, another important figure of the Gestalt field, incorporated elements of Castaneda's phenomenological approach and the concept of *seeing* into his therapeutic approach.³⁸ His thoughts were further developed by Judit Domokos, who pointed to parallels between Perls'³⁹ emphasis on experiencing "here and now" and Castaneda's concept of a warrior who must always be fully aware of the present moment and not be distracted by doubts and feelings coming from the past.⁴⁰

Various Castaneda's concepts have also been mentioned in other psychotherapeutic contexts. The American psychoanalyst Marie Coleman Nelson has attempted to integrate some concepts relating in particular to the sorcerers' ritual of initiation described by Castaneda into her psychoanalytic theory and practice.⁴¹ Teresa Robles incorporated Castaneda's concept of the "path of the heart" into her therapeutic approach of Milton Erickson.⁴² The Italian psychiatrist and Gestalt psychotherapist Gianni Francesetti compares panic attacks, which he regards as a syndrome typical for the postmodern times, with their value fragmentation and a high level of uncertainty, to Castaneda's concept of "stopping the world". It refers to a state in which all of the sorcerer's defences that have forced them to see the world in one learned way are crumbled and new horizons of possibilities emerge if one is prepared.^{43 44}

³⁶ JAY TROPIANSKAIA, "Carlos Castenda and Gestalt revisited" [online], *Gestalt institute of Toronto*, 2017, accessed March 2019, available at <https://gestalt.on.ca/carlos-castenda-gestalt-revisited>.

³⁷ JEFFREY J. KRIPAL, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press 2007, p. 174.

³⁸ JOSEPH ZINKER, *Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy*, Brunner/Mazel 1977, cf p. 258–270.

³⁹ Frederick S. Perls was the founder, or one of the founders, of the Gestalt therapy. See FREDERICK S. PERLS, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, Toronto, New York and London: Bantam Books 1972, *passim*.

⁴⁰ To get rid of this habit of "ordinary people", warriors use a technique called "sweeping". See JUDITH DOMOKOS, "Similarities and Parallellism Between Gestalt and an Irregular Research of an Anthropologist" [online], *European Association for Gestalt Therapy Newsletter* 2017, accessed March 2019, available online: https://www.eagt.org/joomla/images/Downloads/Newsletters/EAGTnews-30_page_15-16.pdf.

⁴¹ MARIE C. NELSON, "Paths of Power: Psychoanalysis and Sorcery", *Psychoanalytic review* 63 (3, 1976): p. 333–360.

⁴² TERESA ROBLES, "Creating Paths with Heart", in MICHAEL F. HOYT (ed.), *Therapist Stories of Inspiration, Passion, and Renewal: What's Love Got to Do with It?*, New York and Hove: Taylor & Francis 2013, p. 232–239.

⁴³ GIANNI FRANCESSETTI (ed.), *Panic Attacks and Postmodernity: Gestalt Therapy Between Clinical and Social Perspectives*, Milano: FrancoAngeli 2007, p. 81.

⁴⁴ Castaneda or Don Juan is mentioned in connection with psychotherapy at several other places, see for example CELIA E. FALICOV, *Latino Families in Therapy: A Guide to Multicultural Practice*, New York: Guilford Press 1998, p. 82; CARL A. WHITAKER and DAVID V. KEITH, "Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy", in ALAN S. GURMAN and DAVID P. KNISKERN (eds.), *Handbook of Family Therapy*, London and New York: Routledge 2014, p. 209.

Although these authors draw inspiration from various aspects of his work, two elements can be seen as especially significant for the field of Psychotherapy. These reflect two trends that have played an important role in the field of contemporary Humanities: the narrative turn and the body turn.

Castaneda and the narrative

Other articles in this issue further analyse Castaneda's connection to the Social Sciences and Phenomenological Philosophy and Social Constructionism, and I would like to refer the reader to them for a more in-depth examination. Suffice it to say here that Castaneda's approach can be understood as narrativist – he understands the world we see around us as a projection of an image that is passed down from generation to generation and which, in his metaphysical-energetic language, is fixed by a certain position of the “assemblage point”.⁴⁵ The world itself is an “incomprehensible, (...) sheer mystery”,⁴⁶ and we endlessly weave stories around it – a story of science, a story of magic, etc. These stories are “descriptions of the world” that coexist side by side without refuting one another.⁴⁷ The sorcerer's apprentice rewrites their life story, systematically striving to get rid of their personal identity in order to create a new one.

Narrative approaches seek to do the same, though perhaps in a less dramatic and mythological way, in the context of Psychotherapy. In narrative Psychotherapy, the point is to realize that an interpretation through which a client understands themselves is only one of the possible interpretations that has been objectified by repeated narration by their social environment and themselves. The narrative approach is inherently political and includes, in addition to changing individual narratives, the Foucauldian ‘rebellion of the subjugated knowledge’,⁴⁸ which involves trying to disseminate new stories in a wider social context and to change the established social narratives and stereotypes.⁴⁹

According to Bradley Lewis, who examines the impact of the narrative turn on Psychiatry, the concept of narrative has a triple role in the context of Psychotherapy and Psychiatry. First, it is the very act of transforming a personal narrative at the client's individual level; secondly, it is a narrative that is associated with the therapy

⁴⁵ CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 13–17.

⁴⁶ CASTANEDA, *A Separate Reality*, p. 264.

⁴⁷ CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, *passim*. We can see a parallel with T. S. Kuhn for whom scientific paradigms were mutually “incommensurable”, see THOMAS S. KUHN, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1970, p. 103.

⁴⁸ MICHEL FOUCAULT, “Two lectures”, in COLIN GORDON (ed.), *Michel Foucault Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977 by Michel Foucault*, New York: Pantheon Books 1980, p. 78–108.

⁴⁹ JILL FREEDMAN and GENE COMBS, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company 1996, *passim*.

school⁵⁰; thirdly, it is the “narrative of the narrative”, or the ultimate idea that it is the narrative that has a therapeutic effect.⁵¹ Seen in this manner, the narrative is the effective agent in any form of therapy, and the contribution of the narrative therapy as such consists only in being aware of this mechanism and explicitly working with it. The narrative approach presupposes a plurality of approaches – each client has different needs and is compatible with different kinds of narrative. Paradoxically, applied to the field of Psychiatry, the narrative approach, or “post-Psychiatry”, then recognizes that many people are in fact comfortable with the modernist narrative associated with a psychiatrist who presents the biomedical model as the only truth and authoritatively prescribes psychopharmaceuticals. However, it is essential for the post-psychiatric theoretical framework that there should be alternative currents that offer a different narrative.⁵²

Castaneda’s therapeutic contribution can be understood within this theoretical framework and includes all the three moments described by Lewis. First, Castaneda’s books describe the transformation of his personal story – from a man balancing on the edge of sanity, experiencing his “shamanic” illness, to a powerful man. They show how an ordinary man became a warrior and a sorcerer, culminating in his leap into the abyss.⁵³ Second, fulfilling Lewis’ second meaning of narrative at the social level, Castaneda helps to change the narrative in the society. His ideas certainly reflected the intellectual environment of his time, and the successful dissemination of his work was made possible by the emerging postmodern cultural and intellectual framework and the development of the Counterculture and the Psychedelic movements. On the other hand, he was also an influential person in this cultural change⁵⁴ and had a considerable influence on a typical phenomenon of postmodern spirituality, Neo-Shamanism. Finally, corresponding with Lewis’ third meaning, Castaneda’s system also contains the belief that reality itself is created by narratives, that these are “effective fictions”, that the world is as it is to us because we believe in it – and that it can be changed by switching the perspective from which we observe it – or, using Castaneda’s mythopoetic language, by “moving the assemblage point”.

Castaneda criticized the dominant philosophical approach on which the social values of his time – Cartesian dualism, objectivist conception of truth, and idealistic morality – were based. Instead of the *truth* in the objectivist meaning of language corresponding to reality, he focuses on *power* – the path of a warrior can be seen essentially

⁵⁰ Basically, it is a collective socio-cultural narrative to which the client links his personal narrative; for example the narrative of an awkward, unskillful, and incompetent individual can be replaced by the narrative of human potential, seeing the person as sensitive, original, and creative. Every therapeutic approach emphasizes different aspects of “being healthy”.

⁵¹ BRADLEY LEWIS, “Narrative and Psychiatry”, *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 24 (6, 2011): p. 489–494.

⁵² BRADLEY LEWIS, “Psychiatry and Postmodern Theory”, *Journal of Medical Humanities* 21 (2, 2000): p. 71–84.

⁵³ CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Fire from Within*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1991, *passim*.

⁵⁴ Inspiring, among others, Paul Feyerabend and Zdeněk Neubauer.

as a search for power.⁵⁵ Power, in Castanedan terms, is not an abstract quality, but a living, bodily experienced reality. The process of shifting the understanding of this is illustrated in the first three of Castaneda's books, by a dialog between the young Carlos, still clinging to the rationalistic worldview, with his mysterious teacher Don Juan, artfully escaping his scholastic questioning about whether his extraordinary experiences were true and real, or rather a matter of fantasy. This can be exemplified by the situation in which Castaneda saw a strange and fantastic animal in the desert. After the initial shock, he triumphantly revealed it as an illusion, in fact a branch swinging in the wind. Don Juan laughed at his "revelation" and told him that Carlos had actually missed a big opportunity to encounter a spirit and gain a great deal of power.⁵⁶

Castaneda and the body

As for the second point, the body turn, Castaneda generally places lived, physically experienced knowledge above the theoretical or abstract knowledge typical for modern Euro-American science and rationalist Philosophy. His approach is ultimately pragmatic in the meaning that a warrior should always base their action on the fundamental fact of their mortality. In an interview from 1972, Castaneda compares don Juan's approach with existentialism. He argues that though one can see a parallel here, for a warrior, death is not an abstract category, but a physically present reality that they take as a guide in every decision.⁵⁷ This decision-making is supposed to lead to "impeccable" action that should, in Castaneda's system, replace traditional morality based on abstract ideals – similarly to truth being replaced by power (see above). Castaneda often mentions that the knowledge he speaks of does not concern the head but the whole body. It is not surprising then that Castaneda gets mentioned in connection with body-Psychotherapy⁵⁸ and it would be justified to suppose that Castaneda's significance for Psychotherapy may be one of the greatest in this rapidly developing field. In this context, it should be noted that Castaneda's later work also included systematic body work – an exercise called 'Tensegrity'.⁵⁹

It may seem that the emphasis on the body can be countered by the importance of dreaming in Castaneda's system. Without going too deep into this topic, let us mention that for Castaneda, everything one encounters is a reality and it is virtually

⁵⁵ We can see some parallels with Nietzsche's conception of "will to power", see PAVEL KOUBA, *Nietzsche: Filosofická interpretace* [Nietzsche: A Philosophical Interpretation], Praha: OIKOYMENH 2006, p. 235–280.

⁵⁶ CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Journey to Ixtlan*, New York: Simon & Schuster 1972, p. 103.

⁵⁷ CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 75–77.

⁵⁸ ASAF ROLEF BEN-SHAHAR, "The Relational Turn and Body Psychotherapy IV: Gliding on the Strings that Connect Us Resonance in Relational Body Psychotherapy", *International Body Psychotherapy Journal: The Art and Science of Somatic Praxis* 11 (1, 2012): 12–24; NICK TOTTON (ed.), *New Dimensions in Body Psychotherapy*, Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press 2005, p. 153.

⁵⁹ CARLOS CASTANEDA, *Magical Passes*, San Francisco: Laugan Productions 1998, *passim*. CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 113.

impossible to distinguish between (physical) reality and imagination. Thus, even in dreaming one encounters absolutely real phenomena and experiences the world with one's body. We can see it either as materialization of the realm of dreams or as idealization of physical reality.⁶⁰

The sum of the two approaches that pervade Castaneda's work is a broadening of the epistemological and ontological horizons as opposed to the positivist approach he was challenging. Castaneda breaks the line between reality on the one hand and fiction and imagination on the other. What could be easily dismissed as hallucination or illusion (as in the case of the animated branch) from the perspective of psychiatry, is getting a new meaning within his system and becomes an opportunity for gaining power. However, although Castaneda ultimately came to "democratize" his teaching, he has always argued that the path of knowledge is dangerous, demanding, and that only a handful will succeed with the ultimate goal of the warrior – "to escape the Eagle".⁶¹ In this respect, he differs both from Neo-Shamanism and Psychotherapy.

Conclusion

During the last decades, a certain conceptual and practical convergence of Neo-Shamanism and Psychotherapy has occurred, thus potentially giving birth to a new hybrid cultural form.⁶² Within the postmodern conceptual and experiential framework, Shamanism is more often seen as a root of Psychotherapy and shamans as ancient therapists,⁶³ as opposed to earlier modernist ethnopsychiatric and anthropological notions that often conceived a shaman in terms of psychopathology.⁶⁴ Shamanism

⁶⁰ If we put the dream work in the context of traditional psychotherapy, we can say, in a very simplified manner, that while for Sigmund Freud dreams were a path to the unconscious and interpreted according to sexual keys, for Carl Gustav Jung they were a path to the collective unconscious and interpreted according to an archetype key, and for Medard Boss they were distinctive phenomena and were not interpreted at all, for Castaneda, dreams were simply reality and were used to gain power.

⁶¹ CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 23–35.

⁶² ANDREAS ACKERMANN, "Cultural Hybridity: Between Metaphor and Empiricism", in PHILLIP STOCKHAMMER (ed.), *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization*, Heidelberg: Springer 2012, p. 5–25.

⁶³ Within academic circles, the change of the perspective was marked by the seminal article by Claude Lévi-Strauss in which the famous anthropologist likened shamanism to psychotherapy. Writing his influential compendium at a similar time, Mircea Eliade prepared the ground for authors such as Michael Harner and, of course, Carlos Castaneda who finally popularized the topic. See CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, "The Effectiveness of Symbols", in WILLIAM A. LESSA (ed.), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, New York: Harper & Row 1970, p. 318–327. ELIADE, *Shamanism, passim*. The Jungian and transpersonal tradition also make the connection of psychotherapy and shamanism very explicit. On the other hand, it is also necessary to keep in mind that this convergence of genres applies only to some psychotherapeutic schools while those established in the mainstream would often dismiss it.

⁶⁴ Within this framework, the figure of the shaman has been identified with the figure of a 'madman' located in exotic environments. Shamanism has been associated with schizophrenia, arctic hysteria, neurosis or ethnic psychosis. See GEORGES DEVEREUX, "Shamans as Neurotics", *American Anthropologist* 63 (5, 1961), p. 1088–1090; ELIADE, *Shamanism*, p. 23–32; RONALD LITTLEWOOD,

imported into modern urban environments, practiced in the one-on-one setting, is often influenced by psychotherapeutic practice and approach.⁶⁵ On the other hand, some psychotherapeutic schools are inspired by (Neo)Shamanism or some of its elements.^{66 67}

Castaneda is a liminal figure who is somehow linked to both Neo-Shamanism and Psychotherapy, as we have seen. But at the same time, he points to their differences. Even though his approach is believed to be derived from Western occult and philosophical tradition, much more than from indigenous Shamanism, he seems to be well aware that Shamanism carries a lot of danger and pain with it. Thus, he reminds us that its goals are ultimately different from those of Psychotherapy. If we saw only an individualized, universalist, and positively tuned Neo-Shamanism, the boundaries between it and Psychotherapy could be largely blurred. By this, both areas could lose their specific values, Shamanism being somehow desacralized, and Psychotherapy deprived of its sobriety and rationality.

Castaneda remains a trickster and a teaser – he can be the one who opens a new door, offers a new worldview and new connections. At the same time, however, his approach warns against stagnation in one stream. In fact, what Castaneda does is not simply to take on the sorcerer's view of the world and to reject the modern one. Castaneda has never opposed rationality and science as such in a radical way. To the contrary, he kept encouraging his disciples to study science. In this sense, he is a consistent postmodernist – criticizing scientism, but not science itself. He sees science and intellectual knowledge as useful, but not exhaustive, in terms of knowledge of the world. Mastering multiple descriptions of the world is an advantage and can help to “slip through the descriptions of the world” and see the world in its energetic essence.⁶⁸

Castaneda's thinking offers the opportunity to look at the limits of our worldview that is created by the culture in which we live. In his times, this meant the modern rationalistic paradigm, but today, paradoxically, it can mean the postmodern eclectic culture that mixes different genres together. What was a revolutionary stance, or a “movement of the assemblage point” in his terms, at one moment is subsequently turning into an established and petrified cultural form. Neo-Shamanism, like any other cultural phenomenon, is subject to the Turnerian transition from antistructure

“Psychiatry's Culture”, in JOHN COX and VIEDA SKULTANS (eds.), *Anthropological Approaches to Psychological Medicine: Crossing Bridges*, London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2000, p. 66–94; JULIAN SILVERMAN, “Shamans and Acute Schizophrenia”, *American anthropologist* 69 (1, 1967), 21–31.

⁶⁵ GALINA LINDQUIST, “Bringing the soul back to the self: Soul retrieval in neo-shamanism”, *Social Analysis* 48 (2, 2014): p. 155–173; SCURO and RODD, “Neo-shamanism”, p. 1–6.

⁶⁶ MARLENE DOBKIN DE RÍOS, “What We Can Learn from Shamanic Healing: Brief Psychotherapy with Latino Immigrant Clients”, *American Journal of Public Health* 92 (10, 2002): p. 1576–1581; EUGENE TAYLOR and JANET PIEDILATO, “Shamanism and the American Psychotherapeutic Counter-Culture”, *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16 (2, 2002): p. 129–140.

⁶⁷ It is also necessary to keep in mind that this convergence of genres applies only to some psychotherapeutic schools while those established in the mainstream would often dismiss it.

⁶⁸ CASTANEDA, *Čtenáři nekonečna*, p. 20–35.

to structure.⁶⁹ In the case of Shamanism, this can mean commercialization, creating a new hierarchy, and losing depth of content. In the case of linking Shamanism with more established forms of Psychotherapy, this can lead to a logical effort to find evidence-based “effective elements” of Shamanism, as is the case with psychotherapy⁷⁰ – such a process can then lead to a further universalization and standardization of the original traditions.

If we look at Castaneda’s work, we have to conclude that its potential for psychotherapeutic use is probably lower than that of Neo-Shamanism, such as that of Harner. However, as we have seen, some of its elements can be successfully integrated in psychotherapeutic theory and practice. What can be conceived as truly therapeutic around Castaneda is the fact that his system does not stop with deconstruction but also involves new and conscious creation. Castaneda helped to give birth to the West’s new form of Shamanism that is based on the rehabilitation of imagination and direct bodily experience as opposed to abstract cognitive knowledge – and that is definitely something that can be very helpful in a contemporary psychotherapeutic setting for the people of the digital age, disembodied and with shattered identity.

Shamanism seems to have undergone its own shamanic illness in the West – seen as a manifestation of a pathology in the first place, only to subsequently be rediscovered with all its therapeutic potential. At the same time, Castaneda may have been the one to help the West see that this Shamanism is actually a fiction. But if we accept Castaneda’s perspective, in which fiction and reality blend together, we can see that it is no less real than the “original” Shamanism. He can help us realize that the Shamanism we dreamed up here in the West is a projection of our own cultural patterns onto exotic landscapes. He can help us recognize that the idea of the universal archaic truth that we have come to believe in is but one of the many stories specific to our culture and time. But also, that it is a story that is needed and healing in the context of our days. He can help us indulge in this fiction and not blame ourselves for it; to practice it as a kind of a “controlled folly” – knowing its limitations, experiencing it fully and studying it critically at the same time.

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⁶⁹ VICTOR TURNER, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 2017, *passim*.

⁷⁰ See PARRY, “Evidence-Based Psychotherapy: An Overview,” p. 57–76, TIMOTHY C. THOMASON, “The Trend Toward Evidence-Based Practice and the Future of Psychotherapy”, *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 64 (1, 2010): p. 29–38.

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